

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY PANAMA IMMEDIATE

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FOR THE AMBASSADOR FROM CHRISTOPHER

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PBOR:PN

SUBJECT: PANAMA CANAL TREATIES: WASHINGTON POST STORY

1. FOLLOWING IS TEXT OF WASHINGTON POST STORY OF 3/16.
2. BEGIN QUOTE: IN A CRITICAL TEST OF PRESIDENT CARTER'S PRESTIGE AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE, THE SENATE WILL VOTE THIS AFTERNOON ON THE FIRST OF TWO CONTROVERSIAL PANAMA CANAL TREATIES.
3. LAST NIGHT WHITE HOUSE LOBBYISTS AND THE LEADERS OF BOTH PARTIES IN THE SENATE THOUGHT THEY COULD COUNT THE 67 VOTES THAT WILL BE NEEDED TO APPROVE THE CANAL TREATY IF, AS EXPECTED, ALL 100 SENATORS VOTE TODAY. (TEXT OF THE TREATY APPEARS ON PAGE A18.)
4. AFTER A REASSURING STATEMENT OF SUPPORT FROM SEN. UNCLASSIFIED

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EDWARD W. BROOKE (R-MASS.), WHO HAD BEEN WAVERING, TREATY SUPPORTERS COULD COUNT 5 CERTAIN VOTES FOR APPROVAL, AND THEY HINTED THAT THEY HAD PRIVATE ASSURANCES FROM AT LEAST TWO OF THE LAST SIX UNDECIDED SENATORS THAT WOULD PUT THEM OVER THE TOP.

5. IN AN AMBIVALENT SPEECH ON THE SENATE FLOOR, BROOKE NOTED THAT THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION AND OTHER TREATY SUPPORTERS HAD FAILED TO BUILD A NATIONAL CONSENSUS FOR THE TREATIES--AN IMPORTANT REASON NO MOMENTUM DEVELOPED

BEHIND THE PACTS DURING NEARLY A MONTH OF SENATE DEBATE.

6. TODAY'S VOTE IS SCHEDULED TO TAKE PLACE AT 4 P.M. AND WILL BE COVERED LIVE BY TELEVISION CHANNELS 4 AND 9 AND WETA RADIO. THE FINAL TALLY IS EXPECTED TO SHOW THAT SENATE SENTIMENT HAD HARDLY CHANGED SINCE THE DEBATE BEGAN.

7. TREATY OPPONENTS PRIVATELY ACKNOWLEDGED YESTERDAY THAT THE ODDS FAVORED SENATE APPROVAL OF THE TREATY, THOUGH THEY WOULD NOT CONCEDE DEFEAT.

8. SUPPORTERS AND OPPONENTS AGREE THAT THIS WILL BE ONE OF THOSE RARE VOTES THAT GENUINELY DESERVES THE MUCH-LOVED SENATE LABEL "HISTORIC." THE OUTCOME COULD HAVE GREAT IMPORTANCE NOT ONLY FOR CARTER'S PRESIDENCY, BUT FOR THE FUTURE OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY AS WELL.

9. CARTER HAS MADE THIS VOTE A CRITICAL TEST FOR HIS PRESIDENCY. IN RECENT DAYS THE ADMINISTRATION'S HIGHEST OFFICIALS HAVE URGED UNDECIDED SENATORS TO VOTE - YES TO PREVENT A CRIPPLING BLOW TO THE PRESIDENT'S AUTHORITY TO CONDUCT FOREIGN RELATIONS.
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10. HAVING MADE THIS ARGUMENT, ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS CONCEDE, DEFEAT NOW REALLY COULD BE CRIPPLING.

11. BUT SENATORS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS SAY IT IS NOT EASY TO PREDICT THE CONSEQUENCES OF EITHER VICTORY OR DEFEAT FOR CARTER IN TODAY'S VOTE. FOR ONE THING, VICTORY REPRESENTS ONLY HALF OF THE PANAMA CANAL LOAF--A SECOND TREATY REMAINS TO BE CONSIDERED, AND APPROVAL OF THE FIRST DOES NOT GUARANTEE APPROVAL OF THE SECOND.

12. BROOKE SAID YESTERDAY HE WOULD NOT VOTE FOR THE SECOND TREATY, COVERING DETAILS OF THE TURNOVER OF THE CANAL TO PANAMA, UNLESS IT IS CHANGED, DESPITE HIS DECISION TO VOTE TODAY FOR THE SO-CALLED "NEUTRALITY TREATY."

13. SOME OPPONENTS, NOTABLY SEN. RICHARD SCHWEIKER (R-PA.), HAVE ARGUED THAT DEFEAT WOULD NOT BE CATAclysmic, BECAUSE CARTER AND THE GOVERNMENT OF PANAMA COULD QUICKLY NEGOTIATE MODEST CHANGES IN THE NEUTRALITY TREATY THAT WOULD MAKE IT ACCEPTABLE TO THE ONE OR TWO ADDITIONAL SENATORS NEEDED TO WIN TWO-THIRDS APPROVAL.

14. BUT ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS DOUBT THIS WOULD BE SO EASY. THEY FEAR THAT THE PRESIDENT WOULD HAVE TO IMMEDIATELY REINFORCE THE U.S. GARRISON IN THE PANAMA CANAL ZONE IF THE TREATY IS REJECTED TODAY, AS A SIGNAL TO

THE PANAMANIAN THAT THE UNITED STATES WOULD NOT TOLERATE ANY NEW INTERFERENCE WITH THE ZONE. BUT PANAMANIAN COULD EASILY REACT TO THIS AS A PROVOCATION, WITH UNFORSEEABLE CONSEQUENCES, THESE OFFICIALS ARGUE.

15. CARTER OFFERED A FRESH CHALLENGE TO PANAMANIAN SENSIBILITIES YESTERDAY WHEN HE ACCEPTED A PROPOSED RESERVATION TO THE NEUTRALITY TREATY OFFERED BY SEN. UNCLASSIFIED

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DENNIS DECONCINI (D-ARIZ.). ABANDONING EARLIER POLICY, THE PRESIDENT SAID HE COULD ACCEPT THE RESERVATION TO THE NEUTRALITY TREATY OFFERED STATES THE RIGHT TO USE ITS ARMED FORCES UNILATERALLY TO INTERVENE IN PANAMA UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS.

16. DECONCINI'S RESERVATION SAYS THAT NOTWITHSTANDING ANY PROVISION OF THE NEUTRALITY TREATY, "IF THE CANAL IS CLOSED, OR ITS OPERATIONS ARE INTERFERED WITH, THE UNITED STATES AND THE REPUBLIC OF PANAMA SHALL EACH INDEPENDENTLY HAVE THE RIGHT TO TAKE SUCH STEPS AS IT DEEMS NECESSARY, INCLUDING THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE IN PANAMA, TO RE-OPEN THE CANAL OR RESTORE OPERATIONS...."

17. FOR THE RECORD, ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS SAY THIS MERELY SPELLS OUT RIGHTS ALREADY GRANTED IN THE TREATY ITSELF, BUT IN FACT IT HAS A POLITICAL SIGNIFI"ANCE IN PANAMA THAT GOES FAR BEYOND THE TREATY.

18. UNTIL NOW PANAMA'S LEADER, GEN. OMAR TORRIJOS, COULD ARGUE THAT THE DELIBERATELY VAGUE LANGUAGE OF THE TREATY ONLY PROVIDED FOR JOINT PANAMANIAN-AMERICAN ACTION TO DEFEND THE CANAL'S NEUTRALITY AGAINST AN EXTERNAL THREAT. THE UNITED STATES DID NOT ACCEPT THAT INTERPRETATION, BUT THE TREATY DID NOT CONTRADICT IT EITHER.

19. DECONCINI'S RESERVATION MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE TO ARGUE THAT PANAMA HAS AN AMERICAN COMMITMENT TO STAY OUT OF PANAMANIAN AFFAIRS--A CENTRAL ISSUE IN PANAMANIAN DEBATE OVER THE TREATIES. HOW PANAMA WOULD REACT TO THIS CHA;GE REMAINS TO BE SEEN.

20. THE PANAMANIAN AMBASSADOR IN WASHINGTON, GABRIEL UNCLASSIFIED

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LEWIS, WAS SHOW THE TEXT OF THE DECONCINI RESERVATION BY A REPORTER YESTERDAY. HE STUDIED IT CAREFULLY, BUT SAID HE COULD NOT COMMENT.

21. THE UNITED STATES HAS SENT AMBLER MOSS, A STAT:

DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL INVOLVED IN THE TREATY NEGOTIATIONS,
TO PANAMA TO EXPLAIN WHAT HAS BEEN HAPPENING IN THE SENATE.

22. BECAUSE IT IS A RESERVATION IN THE FORM OF AN AMEND-
MENT TO THE SENATE'S RESOLUTION OF RATIFICATION, THE
DECONCINI LANGUAGE SHOULD NOT JEOPARDIZE THE VALIDITY
OF PANAMA'S EARLIER RATIFICATION OF THE TREATY, ACCORDING
TO STATE DEPARTMENT LAWYERS. BUT LAWYERS IN PANAMA--OR
POLITICIANS, FOR THAT MATTER--COULD TAKE A DIFFERENT
VIEW.

23. THE SENATE WILL CONSIDER DECONCINI'S RESERVATION
TODAY, AND APPROVAL IS LIKELY. ITS ADOPTION COULD IN-
FLUENCE ONE OR MORE OF THE UNDECIDED VOTES, AND IT WOULD
ASSURE DECONCINI'S VOTE FOR THE TREATY.

24. YESTERDAY THE SENATE ADOPTED ANOTHER RESERVATION
THAT WAS REQUESTED BY SEVERAL OTHER KEY SWING SENATORS.
OFFERED BY SAM NUNN (D-GA.), THIS ONE MERELY STATES THAT
THE TREATY'S PROHIBITION ON THE BASING OF ANY FOREIGN
TROOPS IN PANAMA AFTER 2000 SHOULD NOT PRECLUDE THE
POSSIBILITY THAT THE UNITED STATES AND PANAMA MIGHT
JOINTLY AGREE TO KEEP AMERICAN TROOPS THERE AFTER THAT
YEAR.

25. THOUGH THIS HAS NO SUBSTANTIVE EFFECT, SEVERAL
SENATORS SAID IT WAS SYMBOLICALLY IMPORTANT AS AN INDICA-
TION THAT THE UNITED STATES DID NOT WANT TO FORECLOSE
THE CONTINUED BASING OF TROOPS IN PANAMA. THE RESERVA-
TION WAS ADOPTED 82 TO 16.

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26. ONLY THE HARDCORE TREATY OPPONENTS VOTED AGAINST
NUNN, MOST OF THEM CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICANS. THE RE-
PUBLICAN LEADER, HOWARD H. BAKER, JR. (TENN.), HAS
RISKED HIS POLITICAL FUTURE TO FIGHT THE CONSERVATIVES
TO WIN SUPPORT FOR THE TREATIES. AIDES TO BAKER SHOWED
THEIR RELIEF YESTERDAY AT THE PROSPECT OF SUCCESS IN

TODAY'S VOTE.

27. THE RIGHT WING OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY HAS TRIED
TO MAKE A TEST CASE OF THE TREATY VOTES, HOPING TO
ESTABLISH THE RULE THAT A REPUBLICAN WITH PRESIDENTIAL
AMBITIONS WOULD HAVE TO ACCEPT ITS VIEW AND VOTE NO.
BAKER, WHO HAS SUCH AMBITIONS, CHOSE ANOTHER COURSE,
DEMANDING CHANGES IN THE TREATIES AS THE PRICE OF
HIS SUPPORT, AND THEN FIGHTING FOR THEM.

28. SEVERAL SOURCES SAID THAT AS MANY AS A HALFDZEN
CONSERVATIV: SENATORS, MOSTLY YOUNGER REPUBLICANS, WILL

CAST NEGATIVE VOTES TODAY ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT THE TREATIES WILL BE APPROVED--TO SEND A SIGNAL TO THEIR CONSTITUENTS AND THE ADMINISTRATION, BUT NOT EXPECTING TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR DEFEATING CARTER. "THEY'D BE APPALLED IF THE TREATY WAS ACTUALLY DEFEATED," ONE REPUBLICAN SOURCE SAID.

29. SENATORS CONTINUED TO COMPLAIN YESTERDAY THAT THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION HAD DONE LITTLE TO SWAY PUBLIC OPINION ON THE CANAL ISSUE, AND HENCE LITTLE TO HELP THEM VOTE YES. MAJORITY LEADER ROBERT C. BYRD (D-W.VA.) ELICITED A PROMISE FROM CARTER LAST MONTH TO MAKE TWO NATIONWIDE ADDRESSES ON THE CANAL, BUT AFTER THE FIRST ONE, WHICH MANY SENATORS REGARDED AS LACK-LUSTER, BYRD UNCLASSIFIED

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APPARENTLY DIDN'T REQUEST A SECOND.

30. JAMES M. CANNON, BAKER'S SENIOR AIDE AND A FORMER OFFICIAL IN THE NIXON AND FORD ADMINISTRATION, SAID CARTER HAD BEEN AN INEFFECTIVE LOBBYIST. "WHOMEVER GOES DOWN THERE (TO THE WHITE HOUSE)--DEMOCRAT OR REPUBLICAN--COMES BACK LESS CONVINCED HE SHOULD VOTE FOR THIS TREATY THAN WHEN HE WENT," CANNON SAID.

31. SEVERAL DEMOCRATIC SENATORS SAID CARTER COULD PROBABLY NOT CLAIM CREDIT FOR MORE THAN ONE OR TWO CONVERSIONS TO THE TREATY. SEVERAL DID CREDIT HIS CONGRESSIONAL RELATIONS STAFF WITH SOME EFFECTIVE LOBBYING, HOWEVER.

32. THE PRESIDENT GAINED A KEY ALLY YESTERDAY IN RUSSELL B. LONG (D-LA.). LONG MADE A RINGING SPEECH IN FAVOR OF THE TREATIES ON THE SENATE FLOOR, SAYING THE UNITED STATES WOULD LOSE "ITS PLACE AS THE MORAL LEADER OF THE COMMUNITY OF NATIONS" AND THE PRESIDENT WOULD LOSE "CREDIBILITY AS A NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEADER" IF THE TREATIES ARE REJECTED. END QUOTE. VANCE

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